

ARCHITECTURAL ASSESSMENT

PROPERTY DESCRIPTION

The property known variously in the past as Cottage Farm, Walnut Cottage and Walnut Hill occupies slightly over 16 acres on the south side of Frenchtown Road (SR273), east of U.S. Route 13 and the Hares Corner intersection (Figure 1). The tract includes open field or pasture as well as substantial areas of woodland, but is not used for agricultural purposes. The area around the property includes the large Airport Industrial Park on the west, single family dwellings to the east, and vacant land to the north.

The buildings on the property are situated some 450 feet from Frenchtown Road on elevated ground reached by a narrow unpaved lane, and are difficult to observe from the road even in winter due to intervening woods. The four buildings are a house, a tenant house, animal shed, and a well house (see Appendix A). The main house and well house are vacant.

The main house consists of a two story side-gable double-pile main block with two 2-story side-gable single-pile units extended in linear fashion off the south end (Plates 2, 3 and 4). The house is thus sited roughly perpendicular to Frenchtown Road. The main block and immediately adjacent unit are constructed of brick on a low brick and rubble stone foundation, with a dressed sandstone water table. The exteriors of both these



PLATE 2: "Cottage" Farm House / Walnut Hill. West Elevation



PLATE 3: "Cottage" Farm House / Walnut Hill. East Elevation



PLATE 4: "Cottage" Farm House / Walnut Hill. View From Southwest

units are covered with approximately 1/2" of light tan stucco. The north gable end is coated with this material at attic level, while the south gable ends of both sections are clapboarded. The third, southernmost, unit is of wood frame construction with drop siding on a brick foundation. The roofs of all three units are clad with composition shingling. Fenestration is regular throughout the structure, consisting primarily of 6/6 double hung sash, although the dimensions of the sash vary from one unit to another. An interior brick chimney with corbelled cap, serving three fireplaces, emerges slightly below and to the rear of the main roof ridge. Smaller brick stove chimneys are located within the south gables of the main block and brick wing.

The east (principal) elevation of the main block is symmetrically divided into three bays, with French doors (from parlor and dining room) in the outer bays and a somewhat oversized center door, framed by unusually large sidelights that occupies the full width of the hall inside (see Plate 3). The second-story fenestration on this elevation consists of 8/8 double hung sash to each side of a pair of 6/6 sash. A "shadow" between first and second stories suggests the former presence of a full length porch or veranda across this elevation of the house.

The west elevation of the main block is divided into four bays, with the entrance located in the third bay from the north end (see Plate 2). The entrance is sheltered by a one-bay porch featuring a pedimented gable roof supported on wooden Tuscan-

style columns. The west elevations of the side units are each divided into two bays, and the southernmost of these units features a "service" or kitchen entry in the south wall.

The two brick units of the house have molded box cornices, with partial returns at all gable ends except for the north, where the cornice is fully returned and the tympanum stuccoed for a pediment effect. The cornice of the frame unit is also finished with partial returns, but lacks molding detail. There are two roof dormers, one above each entry. Both have 6/6 sash and paneled corner "pilasters"; the upper sash of the east dormer features a rounded head.

The first floor plan is roughly tripartite, with two rooms on either side of a spacious hall (Plate 5). At the west end of the hall is an open Craftsman-type stair with square newel posts and balusters (Plate 6). On the north side of the hall are a small library and a parlor, with back-to-back fireplaces sharing the brick chimney stack. Each fireplace has a brick hearth and simple wooden mantelpiece of neoclassical derivation with reeded pilasters and molded, projecting cornice (Plate 7 and 8). Built-in bookshelves extend across the north wall and around the north-west corner of the library.

On the south side of the hall are a dining room and small pantry, the latter featuring floor-to-ceiling built-in cupboards that appear to date from the early 20th century. Like the parlor, the dining room opens onto the hall through a wide doorway fitted with 6-panel sliding pocket doors (Plate 9). A stove flue is located on the south wall of the dining room.

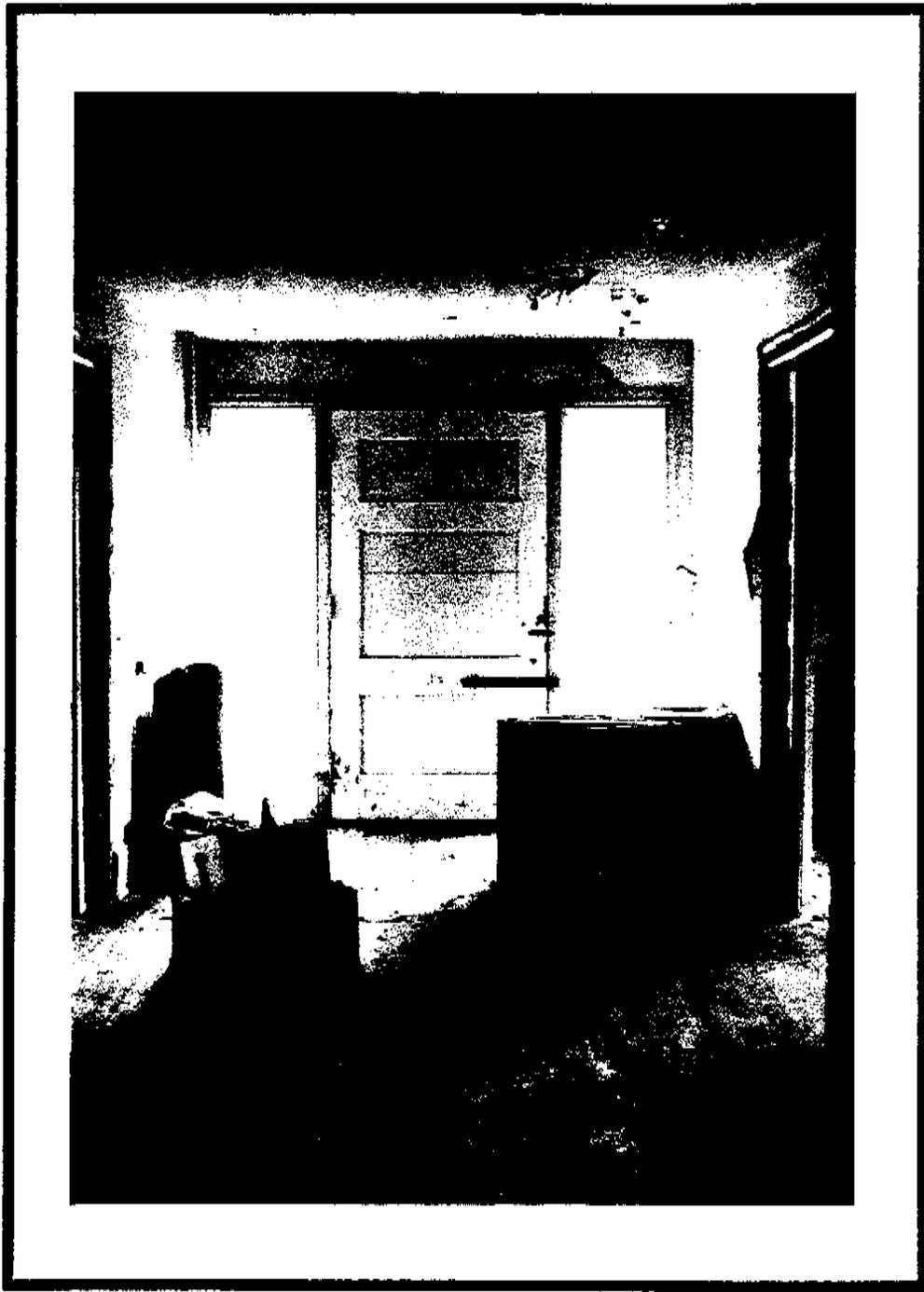


PLATE 5: "Cottage" Farm House / Walnut Hill. View of First Floor Hall, Looking East

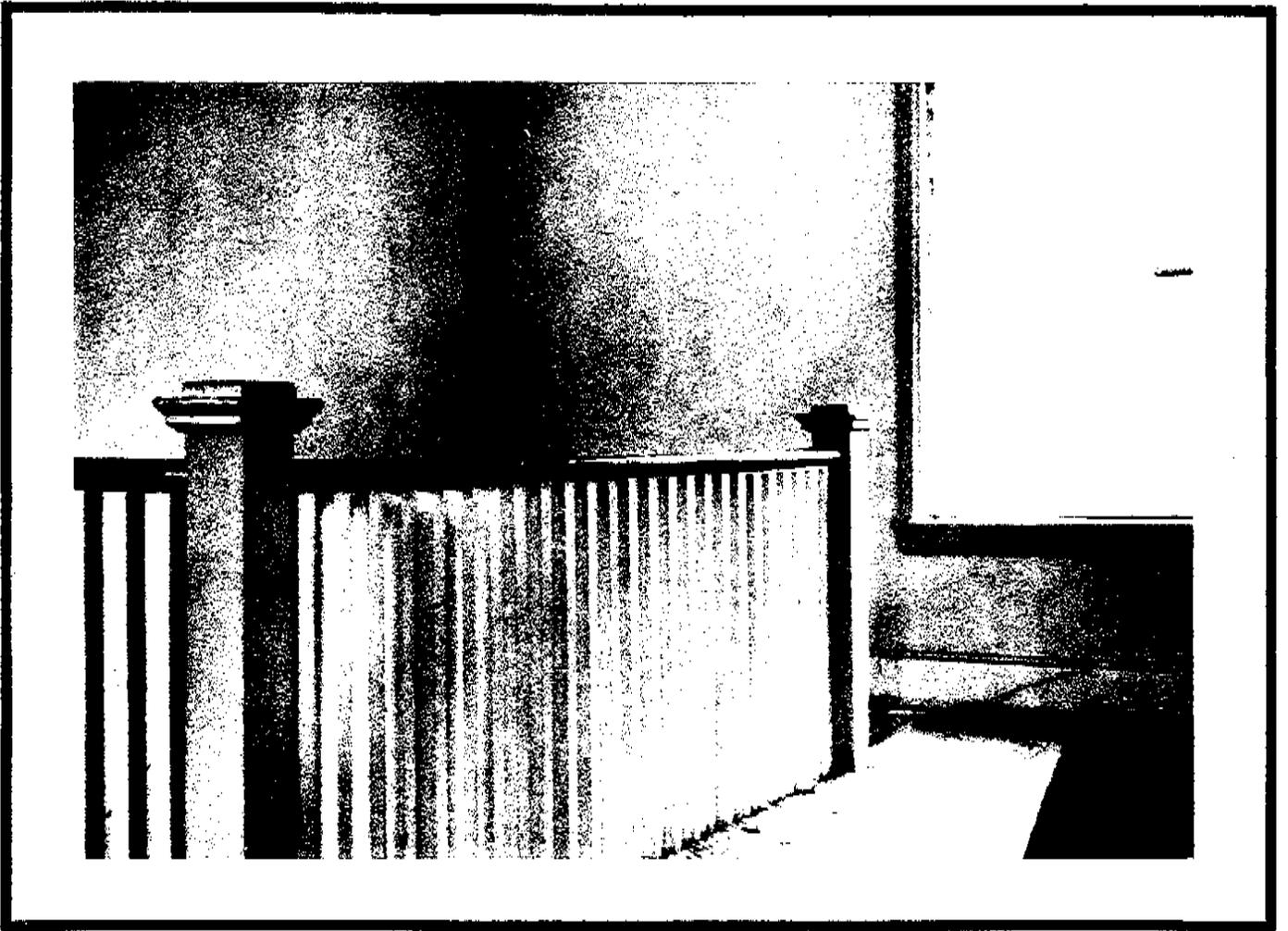


PLATE 6: "Cottage" Farm House / Walnut Hill. View of Stairrail and Newel Posts at Second Floor Landing, Looking Southeast



PLATE 7: "Cottage" Farm House / Walnut Hill. View of Library, Looking North

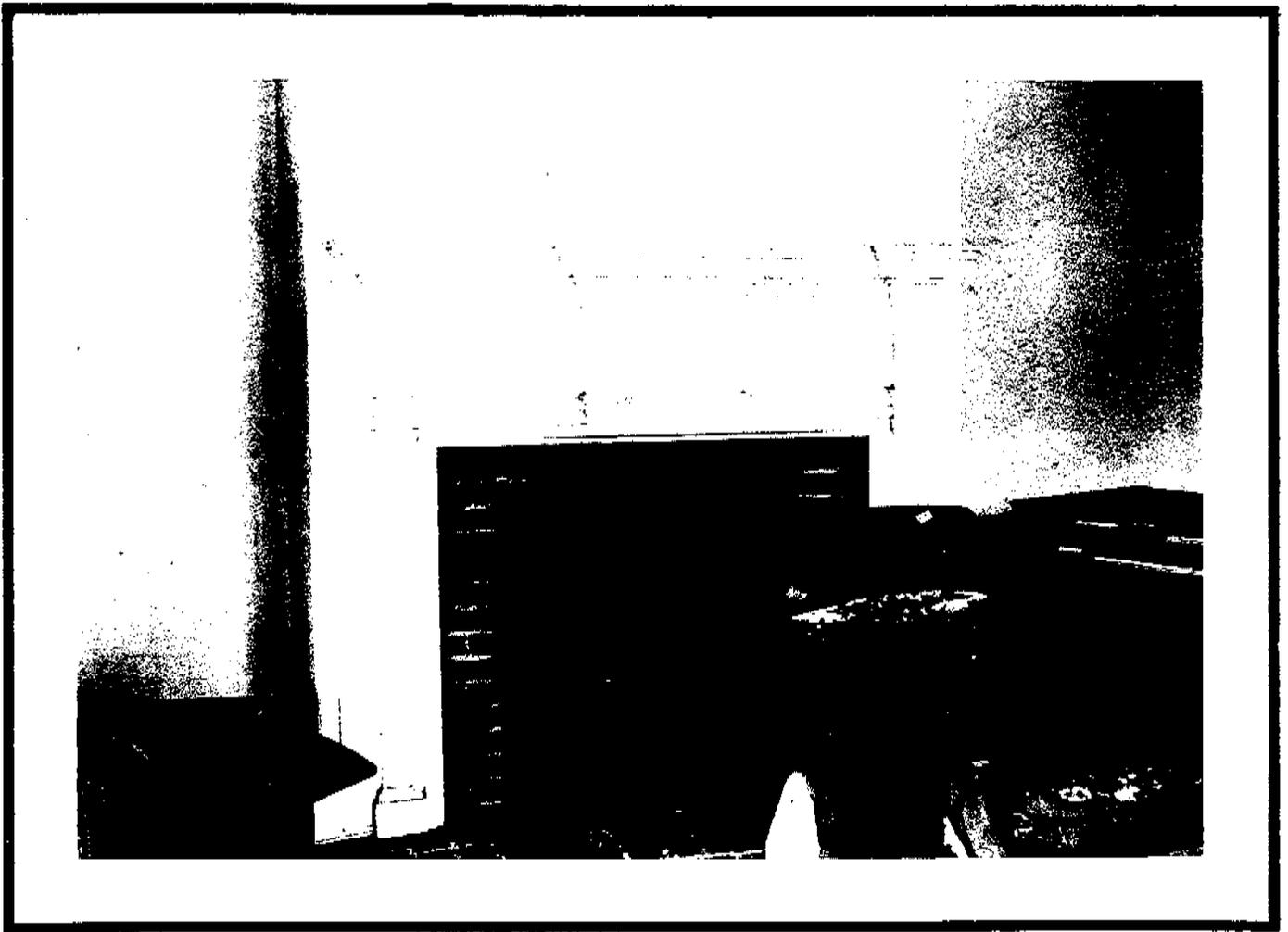


PLATE 8: "Cottage" Farm House / Walnut Hill. Fireplace in Parlor, View to West



PLATE 9: "Cottage" Farm House / Walnut Hill. Dining Room, Looking Southeast From Hall

Woodwork on the main floor (where still present) consists of simply-molded architraves, a dining room chair rail, and a narrow molding strip around the top of the dining room walls (Plate 9). Flooring is painted wood, walls are lathe and plaster covered with paint and/or wallpaper. The kitchen is located in the side wing adjacent to the pantry and dining room. It has a linoleum floor and stove flue, but no architectural features of note. The room on the ground floor of the southernmost unit is empty, and may have served as a mudroom or storage area.

The second floor rooms are arranged along a narrow hall running parallel to the roof ridge (Plate 10). There are three bedrooms across the east side and a fourth at the northwest corner. The mantelpiece of the one fireplace (in the northeast bedroom) is no longer present (Plate 11). A bath is located in the southeast corner. A fifth bedroom is located above the kitchen, from which it can be reached via an enclosed winding servants' stair tucked into the southwest corner of the southeast bedroom. Several five-panel doors, some retaining plain brass knobs, are present on this floor. A straight flight of enclosed stairs ascends from the hall to the unfinished attic. Here can be observed the roof framing, consisting of sawed dimensioned lumber nailed in place. Beaded boarding is used to finish the interiors of the the two roof dormers.

The well house (Plate 12) is situated approximately 200 feet east-southeast of the main dwelling. It features a brick-lined



PLATE 10: "Cottage" Farm House / Walnut Hill Second Floor Hall, Looking South From Stair Landing

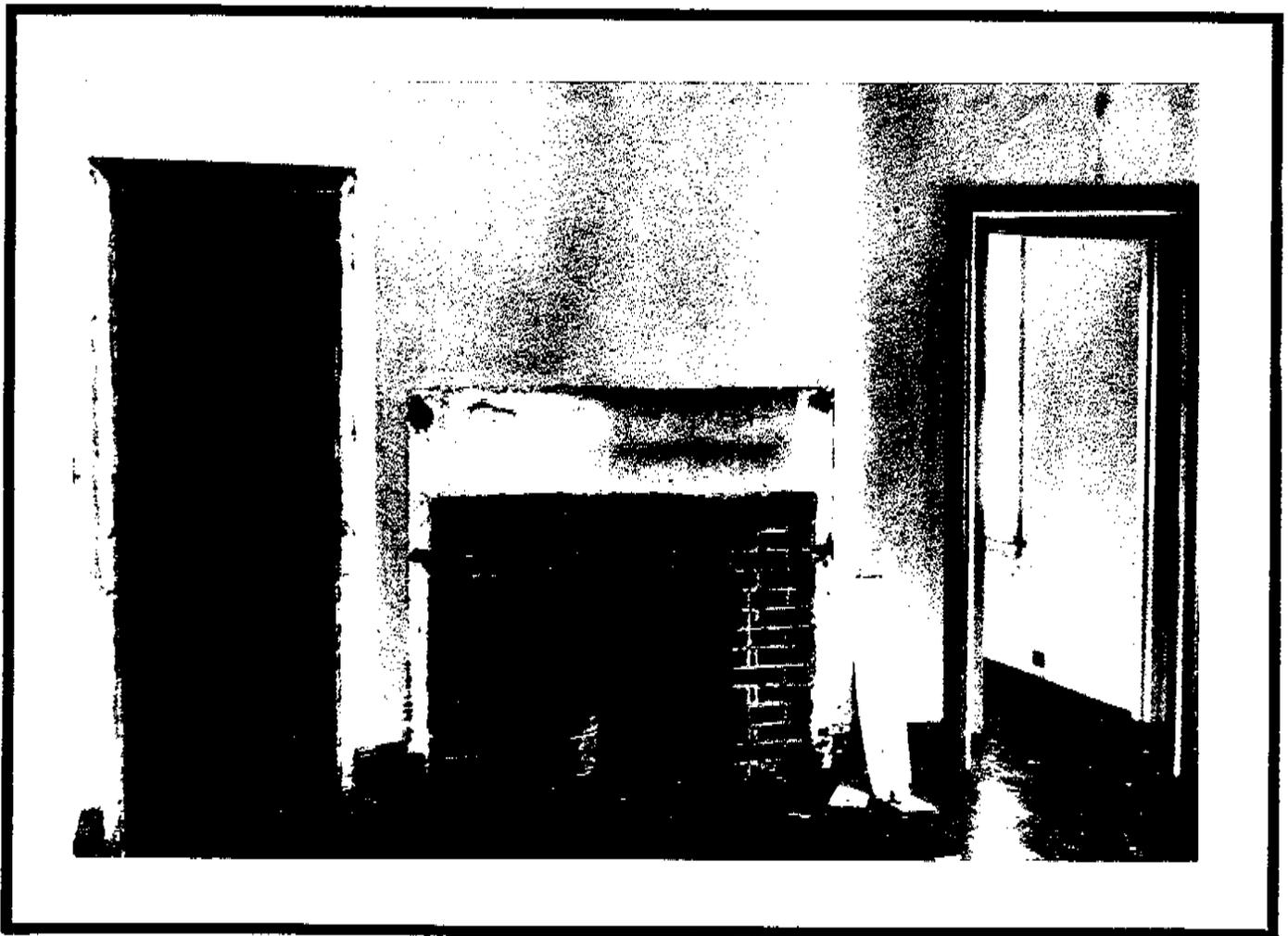


PLATE 11: "Cottage" Farm House / Walnut Hill. Master Bedroom, View to West



PLATE 12: "Cottage" Farm /Walnut Hill. Well House, North and West Elevations

well enclosed within a small cinder block structure dated 1972 in the concrete of the door sill. The tenant house (Plate 13), dating to the 1940s, is a 1-1/2-story stuccoed Cape-style structure on a cinder block foundation with an enclosed front porch. It is sited approximately 200 feet west of the main house. Some 100 feet southeast of the tenant house is a board-and-batten frame shed, open to the west, with a plywood addition on the east side (Plate 14).

HISTORICAL DISCUSSION

The tract on which this house is located was, in 1837, part of a 217-acre farm or "plantation" called Clermont (or Claremont) extending from Frenchtown Road south to Mill Creek, and lying east of the road from Wilmington to Red Lion. At that time Clermont constituted one of 13 parcels of real estate in New Castle Town and New Castle Hundred owned by George Read of New Castle at his death in 1836.³⁶ Read dying intestate, his estate was subsequently divided into four equal parts for distribution among his various children and grandchildren. In 1838 the farm called Clermont (which contained two dwellings, a barn and "other improvements"), along with several smaller, noncontiguous tracts, was granted by the Chancery Court to Allen, Mary, Julian (Julia) and George McLane, children of George Read's deceased daughter Catherine Read McLane.³⁷ Through two transactions, in 1839 and 1841, Clermont came into the sole possession of one of the McLane siblings, Juliana, and her husband, John A. Lockwood, who was a U.S. Navy physician.³⁸



PLATE 13: "Cottage" Farm / Walnut Hill. View of Tenant House, Looking East

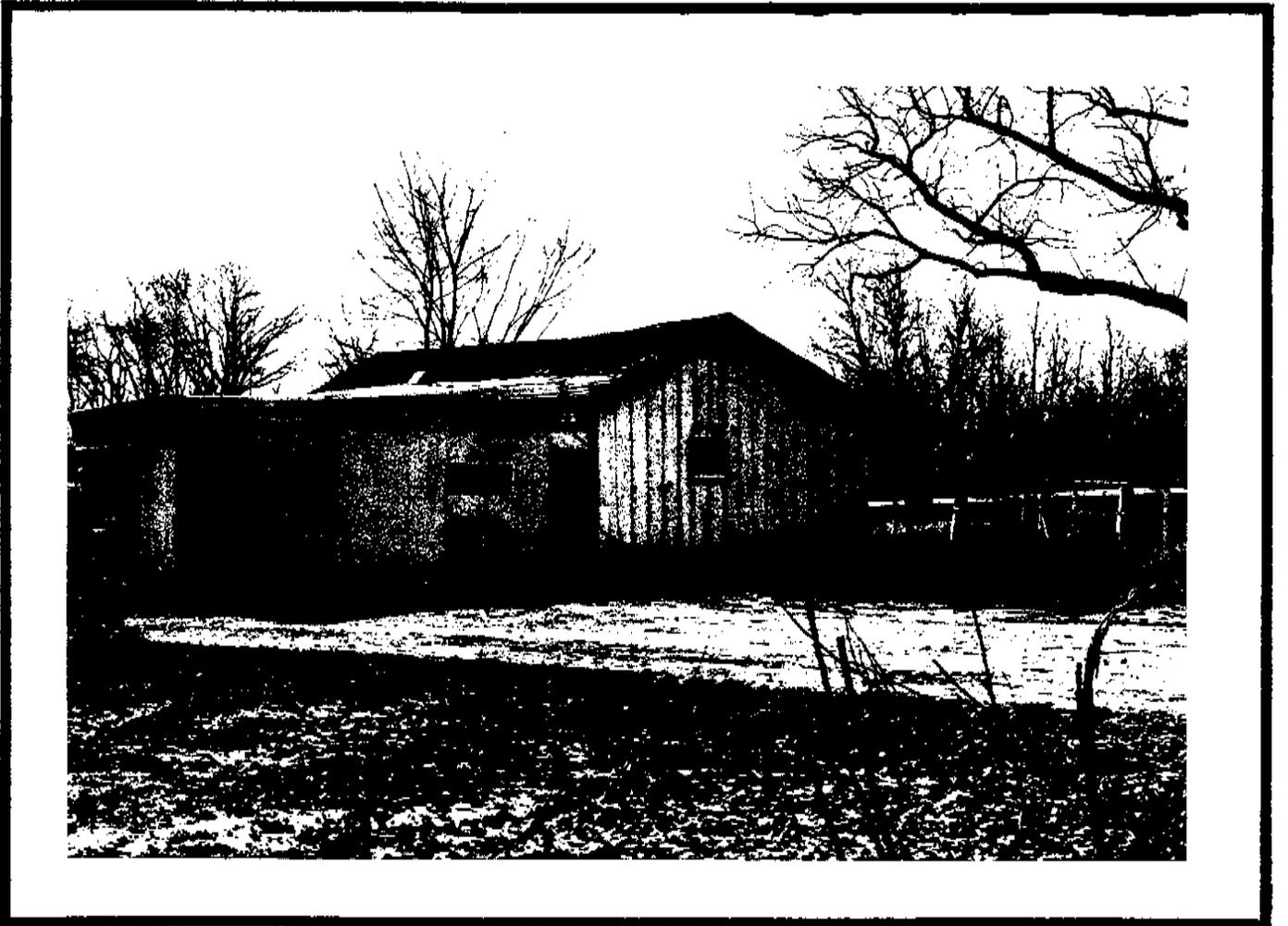


PLATE 14: "Cottage" Farm / Walnut Hill. Livestock Shed, View to Southwest

In 1843 Lockwood contracted with Thornton M. Niven of Newburgh, New York to build a "dwelling house", "near New Castle" on what is believed to be the 17-acre tract reserved from the sale of Clermont. The specifications called for a 34' x 28' main block with a 16' x 14' wing, of stuccoed brick on stone foundations, with a "veranda" across the east side and a "porch" on the west. Total cost of the contract, made 2 September 1843, was to be \$2,100, paid in four installments, with a completion date of 1 June 1844.³⁹

While it is not possible to confirm that the house was built exactly to specifications or completed on time, it is concluded that the house now present on the lot represents the intent of John and Juliana Lockwood to erect a dwelling on the 17-acre tract in 1843-44. By 1847, however, the Lockwoods were living in Annapolis, and that year sold the tract, described in the deed as the "farm...known as the 'Cottage'" to Juliana's brother, George McLane of Wilmington, for \$2,500.⁴⁰

In a rapid series of transactions, the property passed from George McLane to Henry Banning (1848) and from Banning to Eleanor Sarah Hill (1849) who, like the others, lived in Wilmington.⁴¹ Ten years later Hill (then of Philadelphia) sold the "Cottage" farm to James M. Johns, a New Castle lawyer, who in 1866 conveyed it to Benjamin S. Booth, of New Castle Hundred.⁴² Beers' 1868 map shows several properties owned by Booth in New Castle Hundred, among them one named "Booth's Fancy" located west of Hares Corner, and another (that acquired from Eleanor Hill) then

named "Walnut Cottage". That year, Booth sold "Walnut Cottage" to John B. Dickson of Philadelphia. In 1870 Dickson sold it to Thomas Holcomb of New Castle Hundred, a young farmer whose family included his wife, infant daughter and a domestic servant.⁴³

The tract and house remained in the Holcomb family until 1980. Thomas Holcomb, according to Baist's map of 1893, at that time held in addition to the 17-acre "Cottage" farm, several other properties in New Castle Hundred, one of which included 345 acres north of Hares Corner. However, at the time of his death in 1917, his real estate consisted only of the "Cottage" farm, which was bequeathed to his wife, Elizabeth (Bessie).⁴⁴ The tract, described at that time as "about 17 acres of land, with brick dwelling house and frame barn" was renamed "Walnut Hill" and in 1930 passed to Thomas and Bessie Holcomb's daughter, Reba (Rebecca), who remained in possession at her death in 1946.⁴⁵

EVALUATION

As a result of background research and field investigation it is concluded, as noted in the previous section, that the house under discussion was built in the 1840s for John and Juliana Lockwood. The relatively small acreage associated with the house suggests that the "Cottage" farm (late Walnut Hill) was not intended for use, to any material extent, as an agricultural property after the tract was split off from Clermont plantation in 1841. Rather, it appears to have been initially developed by the Lockwoods as a rural residence or "country house" in the Downing manner, home to persons whose interests and livelihoods lay for the most part elsewhere.

From physical and documentary evidence, it appears that the east orientation of the "Cottage" farm house (in terms of "main front" and room arrangement) was part of the original 1840s construction. The west elevation, which due to current driveway location and the overgrown character of the lot on the east side appears now to be the "front", was actually the rear. This is suggested by the 1843 specifications, which locates a veranda on the east and a (probably smaller) "porch" on the west. It is also suggested by the three-bay formal symmetry of the east elevation, which contrasts with the more "vernacular" and informal four-bay treatment of the west elevation. Other indications include the placement of the fireplace chimney off the roof ridge, which in the interior results in the principal rooms (parlor, dining room, master bedroom) being located on the east side.

In addition to construction of the frame wing (which could be of mid-19th century origin with later drop siding), the house appears to have been substantially remodeled in the early decades of this century, probably during the ownership of Bessie and/or Rebecca Holcomb. Alterations of this period include the Craftsmantype main stair (and possible reconstruction of the stair hall), pantry, possible removal of a second fireplace chimney (which would have served rooms on the south side of the hall), insertion of French doors in the east wall to parlor and dining room, refitting (and possibly enlarging) the east entrance, enlarging the second floor windows on the east side, reconstruction of the main roof with Colonial Revival style

dormers, construction of the existing west porch, and coating the brick exterior with a thick layer of cement stucco (over a much thinner stucco layer observable at one corner of the house).

The Cottage Farm property, as well as the rest of the Hares Corner project area, lies, by virtue of its location in northern New Castle Hundred, within the Upper Peninsula geographic zone of Delaware's Comprehensive Plan for Historic Resources. The historic context discussion for this zone, covering economic and cultural trends during the period 1830-1880 (when the Cottage Farm property was developed), notes that during this period, "the Upper Peninsula Zone was redefined as the Wilmington back country and assumed the first characteristics of a proto-suburban rural landscape" (p. 59). One manifestation of this development was the "country house", carefully located within convenient distance of an urban area, but far enough away to allow its residents the enjoyment of a rural environment. The Cottage Farm property is an example of this property type. The house was built for a U.S. Navy physician and his wife, the latter a descendant of the Read family of New Castle, whose lack of interest in agricultural pursuits was indicated by their sale of most of the former Claremont plantation and their retention of only 17 acres for their own use. Similarly, one of the property's subsequent owners, James Johns, was a lawyer. Thomas Holcomb, who purchased the property in 1870, appears to have been more of a "gentleman farmer," as suggested by the large tracts held by him in nearby areas of New Castle Hundred.

The attraction of country living for the moderately wealthy and well-to-do was sustained through the turn of the century, as indicated by the partial "redevelopment" of nearby Christiana Hundred as landed estates by families whose wealth derived from industrial Wilmington. The remodeling of the Cottage Farm under Elizabeth and Rebecca Holcomb suggests the continued desirability of the property, on the edge of New Castle town and, with the automobile, comfortably convenient to Wilmington, as a "rural" residence.

However, the association of the Cottage Farm House with the "country house" theme is more clearly revealed through documents than through the structure itself. The nature of its original architectural character has been sustained largely through its basic form (double-pile main block with side extensions), but clues to the aesthetic preferences of the Lockwoods and other 19th century occupants are few. The "modernization" by Elizabeth or Rebecca Holcomb appears to have created a greater sense of space within the house, and at the same time expanded the visual relationships between inside and outside through the enlarged openings on the east side. Such qualities, interestingly combined with a continued interest in neoclassical and Colonial Revival styles were ascendant in American domestic architecture in the first decades of the 20th century, due in large part to the influence of the Craftsman and Prairie idioms. However, the ability of the Cottage Farm House to significantly convey these associations with architectural trends of the time is problema-

tic. This may be due to the inherent character of the original structure or to the manner in which the renovations were realized; it may also be due to the loss of the veranda, historically and visually an important element in the composition of the house, and also to the loss of landscape qualities which surely existed to provide reason for the extensive "opening" of the house to the east. On the whole, it is concluded that the Cottage Farm House does not in itself sufficiently convey qualities of association and architectural importance to qualify for the National Register.